

# Democratic Communiqué

---

Volume 22 | Issue 2

Article 4

---

8-15-2008

## A Rock and a Hard Place: The CWA's Approach to Media Policy, 1984-2002

Brian Dolber

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique>

---

### Recommended Citation

Dolber, Brian (2008) "A Rock and a Hard Place: The CWA's Approach to Media Policy, 1984-2002," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique/vol22/iss2/4>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

# **A Rock and a Hard Place: The CWA's Approach to Media Policy, 1984-2002**

**Brian Dolber**

*Since its inception, the Communications Workers of America has played an important role in lobbying on telecommunication policies. Its positions, however, have typically put short-term goals of job creation ahead of a long-term vision for democratic communication. Since the AT&T divestiture brought an end to Fordism in the telecom industry, the CWA often has been in the conflicted position of seeking job security for members in a hostile political environment while attempting to develop a just communication system in the United States. Typically, the union has chosen the former over the latter at the ultimate expense of both. This article traces the history of the CWA's lobbying efforts from the 1984 divestiture through the wave of media consolidation in the late 1990s. Trends of technological and structural convergence mandate that CWA revise its lobbying strategies in order to further a vision of democratic communication that will benefit working people.*

**T**estifying before Congress in 1988, Morton Bahr, President of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), stated “the debate over the future of national telecommunications policy has largely focused on intellectual abstractions and concentrated too little on the workers, who are the backbone of the industry.” Referring to massive unemployment and other economic hardships experienced by union members, Bahr argued that Congress had to consider the “human problems created by the divestiture” of AT&T four years earlier (U.S. Congress 1988, 428-9). What Bahr did not adequately acknowledge is that simply ensuring that culture industry workers, such as those in the CWA, are economically protected is not necessarily advancement for the labor movement as a whole. As the telecommunications sector changes structurally and technologically, there are growing ramifications of such omissions.

With its roots as a company union of AT&T telephone workers, the CWA now represents the employees of some of the biggest players in a converged, evolving culture industry, including members of the Newspaper Guild (TNG) and the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET). Since the

breakup of AT&T in 1984, changes within the telecommunications and media industries have worked not only toward the convergence of capital, but the convergence of labor as well. Previous research has shown that this has had the effect of bringing media workers together into the same organizations (McKercher 2002). However, it has also fundamentally changed the nature of the products and services CWA members create. Telephony, cable, Internet, video, and news become further intertwined through changes in technology, ownership structures, and distribution; meanwhile, the social and cultural implications of being a member of “the telephone union” are in a state of flux.

This begs the question: What role does the CWA play in shaping the media environment through policy advocacy? The mainstream of the labor movement, embodied by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) until 1955, and thereafter by the AFL-CIO, often has taken a conservative approach as actors within the realm of media and telecommunications policy in the United States. They have been hesitant to oppose the commercial media system, or have not seen the value or necessity in ensuring spaces for non-commercial communication for working-class people. For example, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the AFL supported the formation of a commercial broadcasting system and argued that unions should work with networks to gain favorable programming (McChesney 1993).

The business unionism of that era, which sought to protect the narrow, short-term interests of members within the corporate capitalist system, however, was met with significant challenges. The Chicago Federation of Labor advocated the reservation of 25 percent of the nation’s radio spectrum for non-commercial use as part of a broader broadcast reform movement (McChesney 1993; Godfried 1997). Soon thereafter, the workers within the culture industries themselves organized CIO-affiliated unions, seeing the importance of the cultural apparatus in maintaining a worker movement and in producing cultural products that would help sustain counter-hegemonic activity. While little research has been done demonstrating the extent to which the labor movement pushed for the creation of WPA-sponsored cultural programs, it is clear that the presence of an organized labor movement encouraged the state to create non-commercial institutions that would, at once, employ workers and reproduce an organizing culture (Denning 1998). This trend continued into the early postwar period, as labor played a significant role in advocating for policies that helped maintain democracy on the air within the commercial broadcasting framework, and pushed for democratic uses of FM spectrum (Fones-Wolf 2006).

Thus, although labor in the United States has not fully utilized its potential to democratize culture, an alternative approach does exist. In more conservative periods where labor has been under attack, such as the 1920s and, as this paper will show, the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s, unions have been more reluctant to take the steps necessary in order to strengthen themselves by shaping the means of cultural production. Here, unions find themselves between a rock (the need to protect the immediate interests of members) and a hard place (the need to change the dominant, anti-worker order). Unions within the culture industry are in an even more precarious position, because the preservation of their jobs may be viewed as dependent on the maintenance of the commercial media system and advanced com-

munications technologies, both of which perpetuate an anti-labor culture and work towards the more efficient accumulation of capital at the expense of working people (Rollings 1983; Parenti 1986; Puette 1992; Martin 2004; Robins and Webster 1983; Dyer-Witheford 1999).

Given its emergence from a company union and its historical relationship to AT&T, the CWA has been unable to negotiate the tension between these two demands in the post-Fordist era effectively. Through testimony and lobbying on Capitol Hill, policy reports, political endorsements, and communication with members, the CWA has attempted to shape media policy such that it will prove beneficial for its members in the short term. Frequently, this has meant acting in concert with employing corporations in their lobbying efforts. Recent controversy over CWA's support for national cable franchising which may lead to redlining, and opposition to network neutrality, make understanding this history all the more important for those interested in building a democratic media system (Dolber 2007; Cook 2007).

However, business unionism has not been monolithic throughout the CWA. As part of the broader American labor movement, pressures exist for the CWA to act as an advocate for social and economic justice, consumer rights, and democratic access to information. Since 2003, the CWA has played an active role in media reform efforts addressing concentration within mass media industries, but has sometimes shied away from staking out positions that might jeopardize the short-term interests of its members in the telecommunications industry (Dolber 2007).

Further, the CWA is a complex, transnational organization with members in the US and Canada working in many facets throughout the communications industries. As affiliates of the CWA, NABET and TNG exercise a high degree of autonomy, and have played important roles in the fight for media reform. For TNG, this dates back to the organization's founding during the 1930s, when George Seldes argued that reporters should run newspapers themselves, and journalistic practices should emphasize the plight of working people (McChesney 2004). More recently, current TNG president Linda Foley has been an outspoken critic of media concentration, and has repeatedly highlighted the negative impact this has had on the lives of reporters, as well as the quality of journalism (Foley 2005). While more research should be undertaken to explore how these internal dynamics have operated historically and today, this article will focus on the history of lobbying efforts undertaken under the CWA banner, not its more independent constituencies. Given these contradictions, the CWA's lobbying efforts have generally worked to affirm dominant understandings of media and technology in order to secure economic protection for members, sacrificing the development of working-class culture to intensifying capital accumulation through a converged communications industry.

## Early History

Since its earliest years, the CWA embraced an affirmative approach towards the corporate implementation of new media technologies. The union grew out of the National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW), a reconfiguration of "employee associations," or company unions, which flourished after World War I.

AT&T supported company unions in order to develop corporate pride through paternalism, and hinder the organization of independent, antagonistic trade unions in the telephone industry. These associations resembled AT&T in their centralized structure, leading towards worker atomization (Barbash 1952, 12).

Management harnessed employee energies in order to promote the corporate enterprise as part of the widespread 'American Plan' during the 1920s (Brooks 1977, 25). Bell hired impressionable young workers and used propaganda in an extensive training period in order to instill pride in working for a company dedicated to public service (Schact 1977, 24). By the end of the decade, AT&T had implemented the use of "human engineering," through which "human relations for the Bell System became a process of indoctrination" (Brooks, 29). In addition, it portrayed itself to the public as "Ma Bell...as cheering as the operator's cheerful 'May I help you?'," having mastered the science of using images rather than words to create a positive emotional relationship to the company among the "irrational" public (Ewen 1996, 85-101; 192-6). As a result of these various efforts, Bell workers generally held a positive attitude toward their industry, despite very low wages, until the Depression. They had a sense of pride in the public service aspect of their employment, having been told that they and their employer shared "one common goal" in providing communication services to the public (Schact 1977, 26-7).

The NFTW formed following the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935, which outlawed company unions. The controversial law's constitutional approval by the Supreme Court two years later led to the establishment of the NFTW, linking together of the employee associations at each of the regional Bell companies. Initially unaffiliated with either the craft unions in the AFL, or the more radical industrial unions in the newly formed CIO, the NFTW straddled the line between being an independent employee association and a full-fledged labor union.

The NFTW made legislative activity in Washington—not organizing—its primary responsibility, because its members operated in a regulated industry where government decisions were influential in determining work conditions (Barbash 1952, 201; 29). Through this strategy the NFTW sought to advance job, wage and pension protection for members. However, union efforts were typically an appendage to AT&T's operation (Schact 1977, 179-80). As one of NFTW's first actions, between 1940 and 1943, it fought Western Union's attempted take over of AT&T's teletypewriter and leased-wire business, which would have eliminated 4,000 telephone jobs. In 1942, the NFTW stood alongside managers at AT&T's Western Electric against the War Department, opposing the government starting communications repair shops that would compete with the unionized company (Barbash 1952, 31-2). Labor and management also cooperated in opposing taxes on pension plans that did not give employees a vested interest. AT&T argued that meeting these standards would force them to drop pensions altogether, thus earning employees' support and creating a consensus within the industry against such a tax.

Once NFTW locals united with the CIO's telephone organizing committee to form the CWA after a failed strike, the new union worked on several legislative issues showing independence from employers. It supported amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act and legislation on equal pay for equal work, and opposition to the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. The CWA also persuaded the Senate Sub-

committee on Labor-Management Relations to conduct hearings on collective bargaining at AT&T in 1950, and testified that AT&T's control over the Bell companies bred poor labor relations. Although the majority report sided with the union, the subcommittee affirmed AT&T's monopoly status, recommending national bargaining between the CWA and AT&T on national issues (Schact 1977, 202-6).

Support for Democratic politicians became a standard device for the CWA's attempts to gain sway over policy. The CWA was one of the first unions to endorse Truman in 1948, while the rest of the labor movement remained skeptical. President Joseph Beirne again called for Truman's nomination in 1952 while simultaneously calling for the repeal of Taft-Hartley, which the National Labor Relations Board had vigorously enforced during Truman's presidency (Barbash 1952, 206). Thus, the NFTW and the early CWA developed a Fordist relationship with employers, forming a consensus with business and politicians around the dominance of private enterprise, so long as workers and union members were protected. Since the neoliberal turn, however, the CWA has not presented a serious challenge to the reemergence of a telecommunications duopoly that is increasingly central to processes of cultural production and distribution.

## **A Time of Transitions: 1984-1996**

"The words to Auld Lang Syne could not have been more apropos for anyone than it was for 600,000 former Bell System Employees this New Year. They will never forget what it meant to be part of the Bell family," the *CWA News* told members in 1984 (*CWA News* 1984a, 5). The AT&T divestiture that went into effect on the first of the year seemed to spell the end of an era. Under a court order, the Bell System had been restructured, forcing 588,000 employees to leave for seven independent telephone companies, and splitting the industry into local and long distance segments. While the breakup of a major corporation may seemingly be a historical anomaly within the context of the Reagan-era's neoliberal ethos, this dramatic change in the US telecommunications industry—"the largest corporate shake-up in world history"—was a significant byproduct of the transition into a neoliberal political economy (Schiller 1999, 7).

The movement into this post-Fordist environment was met with accommodation, excitement and anxiety by the CWA leadership. In the 1970s and 1980s, the union stood with AT&T in opposition to the government's decree (Katz, et al 2003, 582). Feeling a sense of uncertainty with the break up of Ma Bell, the CWA attempted to secure employee benefit protections through Congress during the transition. The *CWA News* instructed members to write to their Senators, in an attempt to amend the Universal Telephone Service Preservation Act of 1983. While the House of Representatives passed a companion bill with protective provisions, the Senate version ultimately contained no such amendment.

President Glen Watts tried to sustain a Fordist relationship between the CWA and the new Baby Bell companies, linking worker pride to corporate success. "CWA members can take pride in and credit for making the Bell system what it became. The same dedication and skills that they bring with them to their new

jobs,” he concluded, “will enable the new AT&T and seven telephone companies to enter the competitive marketplace with full confidence and without fear of the future” (*CWA News* 1984a, 8). Still, the union projected an attitude of being flexible and changing with the times, claiming that “labor must adapt to the future.” Watts warned that “it is essential that unions undertake long term planning strategies,” as “information age workers and industries could fall victim to the same maladies which...paralyzed the American auto and steel industries” (*CWA News* 1984b, 10).

While this rhetoric worked to naturalize the changes that were happening within the industry and larger economic landscape, it also indicated a sense of strategic thinking. The balance between a national monopoly, the state, and labor had been altered fundamentally, leaving workers in the telecommunications industry with the short end of the stick throughout the next decade. While AT&T and the Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs), local carriers, pursued policies of downsizing and manufacturing plants closed and began to move overseas, CWA representatives testified repeatedly before a Democratic Congress in order to secure protections for pensions, child care, and social security during the difficult Reagan years. The disintegration of Fordism—of which the divestiture was, of course, only one small part—did not only hurt the workforce in direct economic terms. It also had long term implications for the development of communications technologies as CEOs planned to rework capitalism around private network principles. Post-divestiture, telecom companies could not automatically count on CWA support in their lobbying efforts as they had in the past. Changes within the industry—the demands of international competition and the desire of the Baby Bells to lift restrictions placed on them in the wake of the divestiture—drew mixed reactions from union lobbyists. The union typically offered support to whichever companies and policies would yield based on the biggest return on short term strategic gains (Katz, et al 2003, 582). While the union often urged that legislation be modified so that domestic jobs were protected, the CWA ultimately allowed for the reconsolidation of the telecommunication industry by century’s end.

## Fighting the MFJ

Throughout the 1980s, the RBOCs wanted the federal government to relax the competitive restrictions imposed on the industry after the divestiture. These restrictions, established by the Modification of Final Judgment (MFJ) served consumer interests by creating competition in long distance and new information services, while enabling regulators to temper local rate increases. As Gene Kimmelman, legislative director of the Consumer Federation of America, told Congress, “The pro-competitive purposes of the AT&T consent decree have reinforced the pre-divestiture Communications Act tradition of promoting affordable basic phone service” (U.S. Congress 1990b, 304).

However, the Bells were not satisfied simply offering “plain old telephone service.” Feeling the pressures of the industry, lobbyists urged Congress to permit entry into long-distance and video-service markets (Schiller 1999, 107). Looking down the road, telecommunication companies began speaking of an “information

age,” claiming that technological changes demanded that Congress lift the MFJ restrictions in order for RBOCs to remain competitive in a fast-changing industry. The “balkanization” of the Bell System made “harmonized action” nearly impossible within the industry, ultimately hindering the development of broadband for a social good (Schiller 1999, 106). The decade-long fight that ensued between AT&T, the RBOCs, and the new long distance operators prevented the establishment of broadband as either a public utility or a highly regulated private utility. The poor execution of the divestiture pitted the CWA between AT&T and the RBOCs in the debate, forcing them to choose between supporting slightly different versions of policies that would eventually lead to a commercially-driven Internet.

The CWA, however, did not pay a significant amount of attention to issues regarding new services in the immediate post-divestiture period. Instead, the CWA approached the fight over the MFJ on the front on which its restrictions impacted members’ most immediate interests—high-tech manufacturing. While the union initially worked to protect workers’ interests, defending AT&T against Baby Bell attempts to encroach on manufacturing, it eventually sided with the local providers, deciding that it was in the best interest of members to allow for greater competition, so long as it took place within the United States.

The CWA maintained strong opposition to lifting MFJ restrictions on manufacturing during the first five years following the divestiture. Several Congressional bills were introduced throughout the mid- and late-1980s that would have allowed the companies to enter the manufacturing and information services. The union repeatedly spoke out against such changes on the Hill, arguing that Congress should mandate that Bell companies manufacture domestically if the restrictions were lifted. “The Congress must set conditions which make it impossible for foreign-sourced goods to be labeled or considered ‘domestic’,” said Barbara Easterling before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, adding that the Congress should distinguish between manufacturing and assembly, if the MFJ were to be lifted (U.S. Congress 1986, 168).

However, by 1990, the CWA changed its tune, forming a general consensus with the RBOCs on scrapping the MFJ regulations. Testifying in favor of S. 1981, the Telecommunications Equipment Research and Manufacturing Act, Easterling told the Subcommittee on Communications that 150,000 jobs had been lost at AT&T and the seven RBOCs since the break-up. “The divestiture was an unwise action in that it fully opened the United States market without the necessary trade agreements to secure the full cash register ringing access to foreign markets,” argued Easterling. In order to remedy these problems, Easterling said that it was appropriate to support the bill, because it would “allow the Bell operating companies to manufacture equipment domestically.” The bill did not, however, explicitly prevent manufacturing abroad—it simply did not explicitly encourage it. Easterling suggested additional measures to ban “‘Maquiladora’-style operations in Mexico, which have proven so popular among the Fortune 500 and AT&T” (U.S. Congress 1990b, 289).

While AT&T opposed the bill, avoiding competition in manufacturing from the RBOCs, BellSouth and its peers favored the legislation, calling it a “big step toward a policy that serves America’s economic interests domestically and interna-



tionally.” BellSouth chairman John Clenendin argued that the MFJ was hindering technological progress and innovation. Calling it “out of sync with the realities of global commerce and the demands of an information economy,” Clenendin testified alongside Easterling in favor of Baby Bell entry into new sectors in order to remain competitive in a globalizing industry. Arguing that S. 1981 would promote the “general welfare,” he said that the debate about the MFJ went far beyond being a dispute between AT&T and the Bell holding companies. “If S. 1981 becomes law,” Clenendin attested, “I am sure that contrary to what some have asserted, Bell-South will continue to be one of AT&T’s largest customers” (U.S. Congress 1990b, 14-5).

### Going Global

In conjunction with the manufacturing controversy, the CWA wanted to ensure that the telecommunications industry remained a key player in the domestic economy, creating jobs and exporting products to the rest of the world. The breakup of AT&T spurred a trade deficit within the U.S. telecommunications industry. According to Bahr’s 1988 testimony, the industry ran a \$900 million trade surplus in 1982, the year that the impending divestiture was announced. By 1988, that had turned into a \$2.7 billion trade deficit (U.S. Congress 1988, 428).

The perils facing the industry wrought by deregulation drove the CWA to lobby to protect the very industry that was badly hurting members’ livelihoods, ensuring that the US would remain competitive in telecom manufacturing. Throughout the period, CWA representatives went before House and Senate committees, supporting various bills that would have strengthened tariffs on imports and encouraged low tariffs on exports. In 1984, John Morgan, Assistant to the Executive Vice President, testified before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Finance Committee supporting a bill while arguing that many of its provisions needed to be strengthened by investing greater power in the executive branch to impose tariffs in order “to ensure that the United States retains a telecommunications manufacturing base; we have seen the unfortunate examples in shoes, color TVs, steel, autos and machine tools and do not want to see our industry similarly burdened as a result of our own government’s action” (U.S. Congress 1984, 27). Similarly an AT&T executive vice president supported the bill in order to promote open world trade in telecommunications equipment. However, rather than suspending all trade agreements, as the bill recommended, he argued that it “should allow a more focused approach aimed at negotiating new trade agreements” (U.S. Congress 1984, 33). Ironically, while seeking legislation to protect itself and help its markets, AT&T railed against non-tariff trade barriers in developed countries such as local content requirements that impeded US business. While the CWA and AT&T had different ideas about modifying the bill, they found themselves working towards the same end: protecting American telecom manufacturing at the expense of other nations developing their industries.

Calling the AT&T divestiture “a unilateral giveaway of unlimited access to the United States market, without any kind of corresponding action to open other na-

tions' markets," Morgan returned to the Senate, supporting the proposed Telecommunications Trade Act of 1985. AT&T claimed the bill "would take significant steps toward addressing the substantial trade barriers U.S. telecommunications companies face in their foreign marketing efforts" (U.S. Congress 1985, 239). The rest of the emerging U.S. telecom industry disagreed with the bill's methods. Edwin Spievack, President to the North American Telecommunications Association, argued, "protectionism would be catastrophic. Prices would rise for U.S. consumers...And AT&T's manufacturing monopoly would be reinstated." The other option, Spievack argued, was expanding export opportunities, which he said were not adequately addressed in the legislation, as it did not guarantee that American-made products would be sold overseas (178).

The CWA also came to support lowering trade barriers in other nations in order to expand US exports, thereby protecting jobs by strengthening American hegemony within the industry. Testifying before Congress in 1987, Bahr offered union support to H.R. 3, which encouraged the United States to open international trade barriers to American telecom products. Bahr argued that the bill would "force our trading partners to play by fair rules and develop reciprocal trade practices." Arguing that American telecommunication workers had the ability to be productive due to their individual abilities, high levels of skills, and education, Bahr claimed that CWA members could compete with any workers in the world, if the policies were in place to encourage U.S. exports. He noted that the AT&T divestiture and deregulation "were taken without a single thought to our international trade position. Before 1984, telecommunications was a uniquely American industry. Today, barely three years later, not a single residential telephone is made in America" (U.S. Congress 1987b, 72). Later, CWA vice president James Irvine went on record to "support fair trade" and "oppose protectionism," demanding that incentives be given to keep U.S. companies based within US borders. "We fear that the laissez-faire trade policies of the 1980s will contribute to an even greater economic catastrophe [than the Great Depression] from which we may never recover. And telecommunications, America's so-called hi-tech industry of the future, will go the same way as our basic, manufacturing industry (176-7).

Despite criticism of AT&T and the neoliberal approach, the industry also backed the legislation, as all were in general agreement about the need to encourage exports. "Liberalized interconnection rules, the AT&T divestiture and the creation of an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty within the industry have created a window of opportunity which our overseas competitors have successfully exploited," stated Edward D. McKeever, vice president of AT&T International (U.S. Congress 1987a, 118). Spievack also supported the bill, calling it "seven years too late," and arguing that it still needed to address deeper issues through anti-dumping laws, lifting restrictions on high-technology exports, and other legislative efforts to encourage private development (139-58).

## **From Old to New Media**

Beginning in the 1980s, the popular press, business literature, and journalism all promoted the idea of an “information revolution” that would enable capital accumulation and privatization efforts (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 21-2). For labor, though, these changes were widely viewed as an opportunity to create jobs in an expanding sector as industrial work was rapidly being exported to other corners of the world. Organized labor has typically affirmed dominant notions about expansion in information technology, despite the fact that, for corporations, “information technology represents just another series of exchange-values which by no means correspond to real social needs” (Robins and Webster 1984, 202).

By the 1990s, the CWA embraced the myth of the “information revolution,” in the lead up to the Telecommunications Act of 1996. While the MFJ prevented RBOCs from going into “information services,” the CWA saw the possibility for domestic job creation if this particular restriction was lifted. Unlike manufacturing, providing information services—going beyond POTS—could not be accomplished outside of U.S. borders. At the same time the CWA had come out in favor of relaxing manufacturing barriers, they came to support RBOC entry into new service markets. In 1990, Bahr told Congress to let “the BOCs enter the information services business, since these companies have facilities and technical knowhow and the incentive to foster the ‘Information Age.’” Despite opposition from media companies, the CWA contended that BOCs and other local exchange telephone companies should be allowed to provide cable TV services (U.S. Congress 1990a, 167).

In 1993, Easterling told the Senate that restrictions on telephone companies from entering the cable market were “anticompetitive” and encouraged the telephone companies to “invest billions of dollars in foreign enterprise” (U.S. Congress 1993, 224). While the CWA viewed this technological and economic change as aiding in the creation of union jobs, they located their position within the dominant rhetoric, highlighting the benefits of the information economy. Bahr testified in 1994 before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, calling market restrictions “out of date” due to convergence and new technologies. Affirming neoliberal notions of the benefits of a converged media system to the national and global economy, Bahr said that the union views

the national information infrastructure proposals very positively in many respects. The NII will lead to the wider dissemination of knowledge and information and, we earnestly hope, to the creation of high-value, high-wage jobs. “Information superhighways” will play a pivotal role in providing a competitive advantage to our economy in the global marketplace. Our nation will benefit greatly by crafting a new policy framework to encourage the development of our information superhighways as efficiently as possible (U.S. Congress 1994a, 697).

In 1995, Easterling testified again, calling for “open entry to markets. Since the old ‘boundaries’ of local exchange, long distance and cable TV have become so indistinct as to have taken on an arbitrary quality, we believe the old restrictions should

be lifted" (U.S. Congress 1995, 335). However, Easterling did note that the CWA opposed "increasing the limits and thus adding to concentration of broadcast station ownership" (336).

This approach to approving of an intensification of corporate control over communication systems on the one hand, while advocating for diverse ownership on the other makes logical sense if we see the CWA's primary objective as job creation for members. As capital was looking to converge, albeit with labor's consent, unions were beginning to respond, in order to protect jobs, wages and benefits within the culture industry. The consolidation of broadcast networks would not only be detrimental to the public, but would also make members of the recently-affiliated NABET vulnerable. Like the CWA itself, NABET has a long history of compromise and has suffered from lack of unity, a weak economic position, and narrow goals (Wasko 1983, 105).

The affiliation of TNG did not guarantee that the CWA would develop a substantially broader view of media policy. Unable to stand on its own in opposition to the fast-changing newspaper industry, TNG had long sought a merger with a larger union, and wanted to ensure a separate culture from the rest of the CWA. Like other unions, they had suffered during the Reagan-era, and had been forced to protect basic economic interests, unable to take a more proactive, social unionist approach (McKercher 2002).

Testifying on telecommunications legislation, consumer activist Ralph Nader in 1994 told Congress that "information is more than a commodity, it is the way we learn, persuade and communicate, we believe that competition in content markets should be a paramount goal in a democratic society" (U.S. Congress 1994b, 370-1). While the CWA's expansion deeper into the culture industry sector has made it increasingly interested in issues of media diversity, and vocal on reform, it has not adopted such an overarching theory of media's role in society or the impact of commercial media on workers that dictates media and telecommunication policy positions. This became most apparent in the union's position on the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and has persisted since.

## **The Telecommunications Act of 1996**

In March 1996, the *CWA News* boasted, "With President Morton Bahr and Secretary-Treasurer Barbara Easterling nearby, President Clinton on February 8 changed the course of telecommunications history with the stroke of a pen when he signed into law the Telecommunications Act of 1996." Easterling claimed that the bill "marks a new era." Within that single month, the *News* reported that "a torrent of activity" had taken place: Baby Bell U.S. West announced plans to purchase Continental Cablevision, while AT&T and MCI began talking about competing against RBOCs as local carriers. The *News* also reported criticisms of the bill coming from the Consumers Federation of America and the ACLU, two historical allies of the labor movement in media reform struggles (*CWA News* 1996a, 3).

The CWA took a "cautious approach" to the legislation. On the one hand, supporters of the bill promised to meet the union's immediate economic needs by cre-

ating 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. Democratic congressman Rick Boucher called it the “largest jobs creation measure of the first four years of the Clinton administration,” expecting to generate 3.5 million new jobs in telecom and \$400 billion investment in cable and infrastructure for TV. In a 1997 resolution, the union stated that they supported the law, expecting it to “expand access to advanced telecommunications services through lower prices, stimulate investment in new facilities and equipment, improve service quality, speed deployment of new telecommunications technologies, and promote the growth of good jobs in the industry” (CWA Executive Board 1997). However, much was left unknown. The *News* argued that while the act was “hailed... as a harbinger of jobs...[a] number of issues for workers and consumers remain unresolved as local, long distance, and cellular telephone companies and broadcast, cable TV and Internet providers prepare to compete head on” (CWA *News* 1996a, 10).

Leading up to the act’s passage, media reform advocates expected that the Democratic Clinton-Gore administration would work to develop an Internet that encouraged media diversity and access to information, washing away many of the problems associated with corporate-controlled “old media.” Surrounded by excitement about a world interconnected by an information superhighway, however, the act changed the logic of regulation within the communication industries, with virtually no dissent coming from either political party. The law now claimed that greater control over the majority of the nation’s media by a few companies was in the public interest (Chester 2007, 17, 41).

To a great extent, the CWA perpetuated the dominant mythology with the expectation that the bill would create jobs. Despite their mixed reaction to the final bill, the union heralded the liberatory power of communications technology, arguing that regulations were stifling innovation and damaging the national economy. As they reported in the *CWA News*, the expected growth in the communications, information, and entertainment sectors

has big, strong, profitable corporations prepared to crawl around on their hands and knees to get a piece of the action. For CWA members and potential members, the revolution means jobs. For America’s children and future generations, the revolution could spell the difference between prosperity and poverty... (CWA *News* 1995a, 6).

The union offered members an optimistic look at changes in the media and communications industries, and presented itself as the labor organization of the future. On the eve of the TNG-CWA merger, for example, a *News* article in 1995 reported

the future of work may be brighter than ever, although there will be massive changes and greater challenges than ever to organize the unorganized. As the world becomes more and more wired (or, in the case of the telephone, perhaps *less* wired) the need for information gatherers, editors, and writers and other to deliver the product will greatly expand. “Newspapers will exist,” [TNG

78 *Democratic Communiqué* 22, No. 2, Fall 2008

President Linda] Foley says, “both as a product you can hold and also on the Internet, the information highway.” ... We are rapidly moving into a single information industry, speeded along by the convergence of telecommunications, the print and broadcast media, cable TV and entertainment (CWA News 1995b, 6).

In addition, the CWA News touted the Internet as a new organizing tool in NABET's contract fight with NBC. Showcasing the power of the web, NABET-CWA Local 41 President Ray Taylor told the News, “NBC's been unable to capitalize on their network ratings success, because their local news has not been able to catch up.” From their perspective, the brave new world the union was entering provided great opportunities for all (CWA News 1995c, 7).

The only casualty in the information age, repeatedly referred to by the CWA, would be those who remained unconnected. Warning of the possibility of a division of society into “information haves and have-nots,” Bahr told the Social Democrats USA in 1995 that “[w]ithout pressure from labor, consumer groups and government, the information superhighway will be driven solely by the profit motive—and such competitive markets are unfair in distributing information” (CWA News 1995b, 6). Thus, build-out and universal service requirements—both of which would expand job opportunities—became key legislative concerns for the union (U.S. Congress 1995).

The union was not completely blind to the undemocratic ways in which capital sought to implement new technologies. Discussing the development of CWA convergence councils to examine the commonalities among media and telecommunications workers in the burgeoning environment, Bahr, who sat on Vice President Gore's influential Council on the National Information Infrastructure, noted,

Vice President Al Gore has stated his dream this way—that one day a child in Carthage, Tenn. will be able to access information in the Library of Congress from his or her home computer. This is in contrast to the shallow dream of the phone company executive who sees a mini-movie theater in every living room in America (Keefe and Batt 1997, 58; CWA News 1996b, 2).

Thus, Gore connected information and modernization, and promoted the myth that the Internet would bring “robust and sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to global and local environmental challenges, improved health care, and—ultimately—a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet” (Mosco 2004, 38-39). Rather than challenge this propagandistic discourse, the CWA formed a consensus with the state and capital on the benefits of network development.

Without presenting a formidable challenge to the Telecom Act, the CWA consented to the Internet's for-profit development. The act brought an end to the regulations imposed by the 1984 divestiture. In addition, Section 202(h), proposed by Rupert Murdoch, specified that the FCC had to review media ownership restrictions every two years, and determine “whether any of the ownership rules ...are neces-

sary in the public interest” as a result of the new “competition” (Chester 2007, 42-43). Despite CWA’s attempts to address the needs of workers in a converged media industry, their main focus had seemingly not shifted from securing short-term gains for workers in the telecommunications sector. While even in a best-case scenario, the bill would have created jobs for telecom workers, it placed the positions of other union members in jeopardy, particularly those belonging to TNG and NABET, running counter to the CWA’s “major strategic goal”: “Wall-to-Wall organization within the information industry” (Keefe and Batt 1997, 58).

### **Mergers, Acquisitions and the New Media Environment (1996-2002)**

The Telecommunications Act not only damaged the livelihood of culture industry workers, but also presented a challenge to the development of democratic media. In the following years, the U.S. telecom and media landscapes changed dramatically. Squabbles developed between long distance carriers and local telephone companies, and cable and satellite broadcasters, before the FCC and the Justice Department in efforts to obtain the most favorable regulations (McChesney 2000, 66). In addition, the lifting of MFJ restrictions did not spur local-exchange carrier entry into the information service and video provision markets. Instead, local carriers could not meet the expense of residential network modernization and put inclusive broadband access on hold. Long distance companies faced the choice of either buying local network capacity or creating their own parallel local networks at a high cost (Schiller 1999, 107). Thus, the CWA reported in 2001 that the law had allowed most residential and small business consumers to benefit from stable local rates and declining long distance rates, while monopoly cable rates climbed more than 30 percent. “Downward competitive pressures” had hurt telephone workers, “the roll-out of cable telephony has been plagued with problems,” and broadband deployment remained slow and sporadic (Goldman 2001).

Telecom was not the only area affected by the act. The new law led to further convergence between telecom and old media sectors. Almost all the major media firms, including Time Warner, Disney and News Corporation quickly allied with telecom and software firms, culminating in the \$160 billion AOL-Time Warner merger in January 2000. The short-lived AT&T-TCI merger of this period gave the phone company “interests in a large stable of media assets,” but eventually TCI became part of the anti-union Comcast.

In addition to new media, the 1996 Act also changed old media structures. Radio came to look drastically different. With relaxed ownership restrictions, allowing one firm to own up to eight stations in a single market, a few massive chains came to quickly dominate the entire industry. FCC extensions of relaxed ownership restrictions, in accord with the act, paved the way for consolidation in television (McChesney 2000, 75-6). In essence, the Telecommunications Act solidified the neo-liberal project’s presence in media policy making by establishing “that the private sector would determine the future of US electronic media and digital communication” (128).

The CWA had inadvertently consented to the systematic exclusion of labor and other components of civil society from media policy making. In the tumultuous years following the act, CWA frequently spoke out against changes in the telecommunication industry, pressuring the FCC to block several major mergers. In February 1998 the CWA filed charges with the FCC in an attempt to block the merger between MCI and WorldCom, calling it “anti-competitive as defined by the Telecommunications Act and the FCC’s public interest guidelines” (CWA News 1998c). President Bahr noted that this merger would allow the company to control “more than 60 percent of the Internet backbone the key to the communications infrastructure” (CWA News 1998b). The *CWA News* also reported the European Commission’s decision to require MCI to sell its Internet assets as a condition of its merger, in conjunction with the union’s efforts to block the merger on the other side of the Atlantic (CWA News 1998a).

However, the CWA did not take the position that mergers in the telecom industry were categorically harmful. Instead, the union portrayed itself as agreeable to consolidation so long as the corporations were not explicitly anti-union, allowing organization within the workplace. Viewing political action as one part of making shop floor gains, alongside bargaining and organizing, the CWA decided it was in members’ best interests to support mergers among the RBOCs, helping them compete against large global corporations, such as AT&T, Sprint, WorldCom-MCI, and various foreign-based international carriers (Katz, et al 2003, 582). In the wake of the announced AT&T-SBC merger, Bahr outlined his goal in the *CWA News*: wall-to-wall organization. “Memo to industry: Make no mistake—that is our goal for the entire industry, sooner rather than later” (CWA News 1997, 2). In addition, the CWA spoke out against AT&T’s plans to split into four companies, under the logic that it would disrupt the possibility of bundled services, as the *News* mourned the potential loss of a consumer’s utopia in 2001.

Imagine being able to deal with your long distance phone company, your cable service, your wireless provider—maybe your local phone company, too—in a single telephone call. One stop shopping, with a minimum of canned music. That’s the direction AT&T had been heading over the past two years, spending \$110 billion to buy cable, wireless, and local phone company access to become a multi-service provider (CWA News 2001, 5).

Later, in 2002, the CWA announced its support of cable provider Comcast’s decision to purchase AT&T Broadband, claiming that “workers would gain greater opportunity under the merged company, including a more positive labor relations approach.” (Northwest Labor Press 2002). For the CWA international leadership, “big media” were fine so long as they were also unionized.

## Conclusion

The CWA has often found itself working in cooperation with employers, particu-



larly the telecommunication companies. Although the CWA joined the CIO in the 1940s, its pre-history as an amalgamation of company unions provided it with a very different history than other industrial unions of the era. The advantages of working in a highly regulated industry during the postwar era did not adequately prepare the union to deal with the shock it would be delivered in the neoliberal age. Rather than rethinking the Fordist labor-capital alliance in light of the AT&T divestiture, the CWA continued to promote communications policies that would benefit employers in order to advance short-term organizing goals.

While the first five years following the divestiture saw the CWA maintain its allegiance to Ma Bell, the union repositioned its policy goals in alignment with the RBOCs by 1990, supporting the MFJ repeal in order to expand jobs in the manufacturing sector. There is little evidence that concerns regarding the implications of “competition” in broadband, video and other services were taken into consideration. This approach culminated in the union’s general support for the Telecommunications Act of 1996, when the CWA replicated the utopian rhetoric around convergence, the Internet, and the “information age.”

The importance of pursuing short-term organizing goals should not be diminished. Since the 1980s, unions have had to fight against the rollback of New Deal-era protections and the implementation of neoliberal trade deals. While politicians, executives, and union leaders have hailed telecommunications as the industry of the future, CWA members have endured lost jobs and broken promises. The immediate needs which the CWA and other unions fight for, such as health care, pensions and job security, must not be overlooked.

However, the contradiction between short-term interests and a broader long-term vision for communication and culture is illusory. An examination of the social unionism of the CWA’s early CIO sister unions might be instructive in reshaping its lobbying efforts in order to challenge the neoliberal order in an era of convergence, consolidation and new media. Such an approach is already being taken by CWA affiliates such as TNG, to the extent that they may within the CWA’s framework. The CWA as a whole has yet to embrace this view fully in developing its lobbying strategy. While its historical trajectory has often placed the CWA alongside its employers in legislative efforts, alternative paths do exist from within the union’s own tradition. These might be followed to develop new strategies, and ultimately, a more democratic media system.

## References

- Barbash, Jack. 1952. *Unions and telephones: The story of the Communications Workers of America*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Brooks, Thomas R. 1977. *Communications Workers of America: The story of a union*. New York: Mason/Charter.
- CWA Executive Board. 1997. Preserving good jobs and quality universal service in a competitive environment. <http://www.cwa-union.org/issues/communications-policy/reports/jobsenv.html>.
- CWA News. 1984a. Farewell Ma Bell. January, 5, 8.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984b. Watts: Labor must adapt to future. January, 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995a. Bahr, Foley on their vision of the future: Extending the union umbrella throughout the information age. November/December, 6.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995b. Bahr warns workers, citizens could be info highway 'roadkill.' March, 6.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995c. NABET mobilization moves to internet. April, 7.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995d. Telecom Policy Raises Multibillion Dollar Questions. April, 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996a. Bahr urges end to job destruction as Clinton signs massive telecom bill. March, 3, 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996b. Bringing home our vision of the information highway. January, 2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. Telecom: New Strategies for Companies—and the Union. 1997. July, 2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998a. CWA continues fight against MCI-WorldCom deal—Merger doesn't meet public interest test, FCC is told. July, 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998b. MCI/WorldCom merger puts internet at risk. April, 9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998c. Merged MCI/WorldCom would control internet, stifle competition, CWA charges in FCC filing. February, 4.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. AT&T breakup plans likely to doom bundled service. February, 5.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002a. Broadband bill would expand competition, jobs. May, 8.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002b. The media and democracy: Who owns the news? November, 13.
- Chester, Jeffrey. 2007. *Digital destiny: New media and the future of democracy*. New York: The New Press.
- Cook, Brian. 2007. Not neutrality. *In These Times*, March 26.
- Denning, Michael. 1998. *The cultural front*. New York: Verso.
- Dolber, Brian. 2007. Missing the boat?: The CWA's approach to media policy, 1984-2006. Paper presented at the Social Science Research Council Academic Pre-Conference of the National Conference for Media Reform, January 11, Memphis, Tennessee.
- Dyer-Witheyford, Nick. 1999. *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and circuits of struggle in high technology capitalism*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- Ewen, Stuart. 1996. *PR!: A social history of spin*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foley, Linda. 2005. Media reform from the inside-out: The newspaper guild-CWA. In *The future of media: Resistance and reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Ed. Robert W. McChesney, Russell Newman and Ben Scott. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Fones-Wolf, Elizabeth. 2006. *Waves of opposition: Labor and the struggle for democratic radio*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- Godfried, Nathan. 1997. *WCFL: Chicago's voice of labor, 1926-1978*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- Goldman, Debbie. 2001. The Telecommunications Act Five Years Later. CWA Memo.
- Katz, Harry, Rosemary Batt and Jeffrey Keefe. 2003. The revitalization of the CWA: Integrating collective bargaining, political action, and organizing. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 56(4): 573-589.
- Keefe, Jeffrey and Rosemary Batt. 1997. Restructuring of telecommunications in

- the United States. In *Telecommunications: Restructuring world and employment relations worldwide*. Ed. Harry Katz. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Martin, Christopher. 2004. *Framed!: Labor and the corporate media*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- McChesney, Robert W. 1993. *Telecommunications, mass media and democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2000. *Rich media poor democracy: Communication politics in dubious times*. New York: The New Press.
- . 2004. *The problem of the media: U.S. communication politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- McKercher, Catherine. 2002. *Newswriters unite: Labor, convergence and North American newspapers*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Mosco, Vincent. 2004. *The Digital sublime: Myth, power, and cyberspace*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Northwest Labor Press*. 2002. CWA applauds support of Beaverton mayor for AT&T merger. June 21. <http://www.nwlaborpress.org/2002/6-21-02CWA.html>.
- Parenti, Michael. 1986. *Inventing reality: The politics of the mass media*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Puette, William. 1992. *Through jaundiced eyes: How the media view organized labor*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Robins, Kevin and Frank Webster. 1983. Information technology, Luddism and the working class. In *The critical communications review, v. 1: Labor, the working class, and the media*, ed. Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Rollings, Jerry. 1983. Mass communications and the American worker. In *The critical communications review, v. 1: Labor, the working class, and the media*, ed. Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Schacht, John. 1977. The rise of the Communications Workers of America: Union organization and centralization in the telephone industry, 1935-1947. PhD diss., University of Iowa.
- Schiller, Dan. 1999. *Digital capitalism: Networking the global market system*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- U.S. Congress. House. 1987a. House. Committee on Energy and Commerce. Telecommunications trade. 100<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Mar. 10.
- . 1987b. Committee on Energy and Commerce. Trade and competitiveness, part 2. 100<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Mar. 5, 10, 11.
- . 1988. Committee on Energy and Commerce. Labor issues in the telecommunications industry. 100<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., May 17 and June 16.
- . 1990. Committee on Energy and Commerce. Telecommunications Policy Act. 101<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Apr. 27, May 10.
- . 1994a. Committee on Energy and Commerce. National communications infrastructure (part 2). 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Jan. 27, Feb. 1-3.
- . 1994b. Committee on Energy and Commerce. National communications infrastructure (part 3). 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Feb. 8-10.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. Committee on Commerce. Communications law reform. 104<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., May 10-12.
- U.S. Congress. Senate. 1984. Committee on Finance. 1984. Telecommunications trade act of 1984. 98<sup>th</sup> Cong. 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Sept. 12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1985. Committee on Finance. *Export on U.S. telecommunications products*. 99<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., May 3.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986. Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. *Federal telecommunications policy act of 1986*. 99<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Sept. 10, 16.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. Telecommunications equipment research and manufacturing competition act. 101<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Apr. 25, May 9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. S. 1086, the Telecommunications infrastructure act of 1993. 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., July 14, Sept. 8.
- Wasko, Janet. 1983. Trade unions and broadcasting: A case study of the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians. In *The critical communications review, v. 1: Labor, the working class, and the media*, ed. Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Brian would like to thank Dan Schiller and Bob McChesney for supporting this research, and those who expressed interest in this topic when a previous version of this paper was presented at the Social Science Research Council's Academic Pre-Conference at the 2007 National Conference for Media Reform in Memphis. In addition, he'd like to thank Brian Cook of *In These Times* and Lenny Sapozhnikov of JSpot.com for addressing issues raised here in popular media.

*Brian Dolber is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His research involves the intersection of labor history and media history in the United States. The inspiration for this project came from Brian's time spent as a Congressional fellow in rep. Diane Watson's office during the summer of 2006, working on network neutrality legislation.*